

Ecological Metaphors in *Saving Fish from Drowning* from the Perspective of Ecocriticism

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Abstract: *Saving Fish from Drowning* is a novel by the Chinese-American female writer Amy Tan. With its unique non-linear narrative style, cross-cultural perspective and rich natural descriptions, the novel breaks away from the narrative mode of previous Tan's works which primarily centered on mother-daughter relationships and cultural identity. This article employs ecocriticism theory, focusing on typical elements such as animals, plants and natural landscapes in the work, to deeply explore the ecological metaphors and symbolic meanings contained therein, and reveal the profound ecological connotations. By sorting out the interactive relationship among Western tourists, the Southern tribe and the natural environment, it analyzes the cultural logic behind each group's ecological beliefs and behaviors, prompting readers to reflect on real-world ecological challenges and humanity's ways of living.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Natural Imagery, Ecological Metaphors.

1. Introduction

Amy Tan is a Chinese-American female writer whose works focus on mother-daughter emotional entanglements and offer profound analyses of East-West cultural clashes. Her first semi-autobiographical novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, published in 1989, quickly caused a sensation in mainstream American literary circles. She later gained worldwide acclaim for her series of novels centered on "mother-daughter relationships," such as *The Kitchen God's Wife*, and *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Tan's 2005 novel, debuted on The New York Times bestseller list and garnered significant attention in literary circles across China and the United States. In this novel, Amy Tan boldly transcends her previous themes of mother-daughter dynamics and East-West cultural clashes. Moving beyond personal memories and family experiences, she weaves in elements of ethnic minorities, natural landscapes, and primitive religions. The narrative emphasizes natural motifs, unfolding through an unconventional, non-linear storytelling approach.

Saving Fish from Drowning chronicles the experiences of a tour group of twelve Americans from Western metropolises traveling through Yunnan, China, and the Lanna Kingdom. To them, these places are unfamiliar and mysterious. After their tour leader, who was knowledgeable about Eastern cultures, passes away, they are led by a white man unfamiliar with the local culture. First, they arrive in the mountainous regions of Yunnan. Unfamiliar with local customs, they desecrate a sacred cave revered as a divine shrine and are expelled from Yunnan by the locals. Next, they are deceived into venturing deep into the primeval forest. Enchanted by the pristine landscapes and astonished by the indigenous way of life, they initially feel wonder and curiosity. However, upon realizing they cannot return to their lodgings and must spend time in the wilderness, their delight and excitement give way to fear and apprehension. Yet, through genuine interaction with the locals and immersion in nature, they gradually got accustomed to the wilderness life, becoming more deeply connected to the natural world. During this period, isolated from the outside world's noise and temptations, and in close communion with nature and themselves, the travelers

underwent a transformation in their thoughts and spirits. They reconciled with their inner conflicts and fostered more harmonious relationships with others.

Although *Saving Fish from Drowning* contains extensive descriptions of natural ecology, current attention to American ethnic fiction remains largely confined to discussions of racism, gender discrimination, and social justice, overlooking the "critical state" in which contemporary ethnic fiction finds itself[6]. Furthermore, according to Wang Nuo's[10] definition of ecological literature—a literary genre emerging from the "ecosystem" ideological framework and grounded in the Earth's holistic ecological interests and values as its critical foundation—*Saving Fish from Drowning* does not fall within the category of ecological literature[8]. Consequently, little studies have yet employed ecological criticism theory to deeply explore the ecological metaphors embedded in the work's imagery of flora and fauna and its depictions of natural landscapes.

Guided by ecological criticism methodology and focusing on Amy Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning*, this paper analyzes the ecological metaphors embedded in specific animals and natural landscapes within the work. It identifies the metaphorical connotations of imagery in the text, revealing the profound ecological implications underlying the work and the insights it offers to readers.

2. Overview of Ecocriticism Theory

2.1. Concept of Ecocriticism Theory

As noted by Wang Nuo[9], ecocriticism is a literary criticism that explores the relationship between literature and nature under the guidance of ecological thought, particularly ecological holism. It reveals the ideological and cultural roots of ecological crises reflected in literary works.

Emerging from profound concerns over escalating global ecological crises, ecological criticism serves as a literary and cultural response to modern industrial civilization's destruction of the natural environment. Its themes predominantly focus on depicting the existential conditions of humans and natural entities, ecological crises, social ethics, and cultural characteristics[5]. As a systematic literary theory,

ecocriticism was formally named and promoted by Glotfelty and others in the early 1990s.

2.2. Theoretical Research Scope of Ecocriticism

Glotfelty, one of the main advocates and initiators of literary criticism, defines ecocriticism in this way: "What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies"[2].

Scott Slovic, a leading scholar of American ecocriticism, defines it more clearly and concretely: "Ecocriticism refers to the study of nature writing through any scholarly approach, and conversely, to the examination of ecological meanings and human-nature relationships within any literary text-even those that initially appear to make no mention of nonhuman nature"[3].

Domestic scholar Wang Nuo points out: "The subject matter of ecocriticism is by no means confined to eco-literature, nor is it limited to works that directly depict natural landscapes... As long as a work addresses the root causes of ecological crises or reveals the relationship between humans and the natural environment, it should be considered a valid subject for ecocritical study and analysis-even if it contains no natural imagery whatsoever, merely portraying the implementation of an environmentally destructive policy, a consumerist lifestyle, or a severe environmental pollution incident"[10].

Therefore, the scope of ecological criticism theory is not confined to ecological texts; it can extend to non-ecological texts. In other words, we can apply ecological criticism theory to analyze works like *Saving Fish from Drowning*.

3. Ecological Metaphors in Saving Fish from Drowning

The author believes that the most representative metaphorical imagery in *Saving Fish from Drowning* falls into two categories: animal imagery and natural landscapes. This paper will analyze these two types of imagery.

3.1. Ecological Metaphors in Animal Imagery

Fish

The "*Saving Fish from Drowning*" plot itself constitutes a profound ecological irony. In the novel, a preacher claims to save 100 lives daily by netting 100 fish, justifying this as preventing their drowning. Yet all the fish pulled ashore die. The preacher laments that he must have been too late to save them, prompting him to seek more nets for quicker rescues. Lacking funds, he sells the fish to finance new nets. This sequence starkly exposes the absurdity of the anthropocentric perspective. Fish live in water-how could they drown? The fisherman imposed his own logic onto creatures entirely dependent on water for survival. His "rescue" actually inflicted the most fatal harm: removing them from their essential aquatic environment. This precisely metaphorically captures the formalism of many real-world ecological conservation efforts.

The imagery of the "fish" in "*Saving Fish from Drowning*" is unmistakable, pointing directly to the marginalized Nan Yi

tribe. The Nan Yi tribe in the novel lives in jungle communities. Though oppressed by militarism, they lead relatively contented lives. Yet American tourists stubbornly insist they can "save" the tribe, offering "aid" through news coverage and other means that expose their lives to public scrutiny, drawing sympathy from people worldwide. Subsequently, an American film company invited the Southern tribes to participate in a reality show titled "Mad Jungle," hoping to generate income for them. The outcome proved disastrous: not a single penny was earned, and during the show's broadcast, several tribe members succumbed to untreated malaria. Yet the program's airing unleashed greed, as "drug growers and treasure hunters bribed the military, arriving armed with AK-47s and shovels. They plundered the entire mountain, leaving not a single blanchophora behind. "The Army of God did not achieve the life they envisioned. Instead, they ended up in refugee camps, suffering from various diseases. The Nami people were forced to leave their homes, wandering to border refugee camps. Later, to escape government retaliation, they hid in a jungle called "Other Places," reverting to a primitive lifestyle.

Four groups attempted to "rescue" the Southern tribes, but the outcome proved as absurd and counterproductive as "*saving fish from drowning*," forcing the Southern tribes to flee to "Other Places." As a character in the novel states: "Rescuing those who need no rescue, invading others' lands to inflict harm-in name it is aid, in truth it is murder." Through the title "*Saving Fish from Drowning*," the author exposes humanity's demonic visage-its disregard for other living beings and defiance of natural order[7].

3.2. Ecological Metaphors in Natural Landscape Descriptions

Tropical Jungle

Members of the tour group lavishly praise the exotic natural landscapes of the Lanna Kingdom's tropical jungle, describing it as "Alice's Wonderland," "a verdant new world, truly a realm brimming with vitality," and "just like paradise." These descriptions reveal their astonishment and curiosity toward the pristine environment. Through such portrayals, the tropical jungle emerges as a metaphor for an untamed, untamed vitality-a primal force untamed and unassimilated by modern industrial civilization, brimming with wildness and exuberant life.

The jungle, with its unfamiliar appearance defying Western tourists' cognitive logic, symbolized an independent, powerful natural force standing in opposition to human (especially Western) civilizational order. Its inscrutability served as a reminder of the limitations of human understanding. The jungle's lushness, antiquity, and seemingly chaotic yet intrinsically ordered growth metaphorically represented life's inherent tenacity, creativity, and capacity for self-renewal. It embodied a microcosm of Earth's vitality. The vitality and self-sufficiency of the primeval forest starkly contrast the pallor, rigidity, and alienation from nature inherent in modern civilization. It serves as a mirror reflecting the potential ecological cost behind humanity's modern "progress." The value of this pristine landscape lies in its very existence as a "non-anthropocentric" world, challenging humanity's arrogance in conquering nature.

Grotto of Female Genitalia

The tour group arrived at Shi Zhong Temple in Yunnan, where numerous caves and carvings of varying sizes-some

dating back over a thousand years-adorn the site. The late tour leader hoped members would gain insight into diverse ethnic customs and cultures through these caves and sculptures. In the materials provided to the group, she specifically explained the cultural symbolism of one cave featuring female genitalia. She wrote: One shrine is aptly named the Female Genitalia Cave. Many ethnic groups and tribes in this region believe the world was created from a dark, womb-like void. Thus, people hold this cave in profound reverence. What makes this cave particularly intriguing is its shrine, no more than twenty inches tall and wide, carved in the shape of an external vulva...[1]. This was clearly an important cultural detail. Yet the tour group members paid it no mind whatsoever. One even mistakenly assumed it was an “open-air toilet.” The cave-like structure contained a roughly 20-inch square pool with residual “urine” (actually rainwater). In reality, this very site was the female stone carving specifically highlighted in the tour leader's materials as a sacred shrine revered by locals. His actions undoubtedly constituted a grave desecration of the sacred, an unforgivable offense that provoked intense anger among the locals, who expelled the entire group from Yunnan.

Biologically, the uterus is the vessel for nurturing life. Thus, the “Grotto of Female Genitalia” symbolizes the origin of life—nature's most primordial and pristine sanctuary. Within indigenous cultures, it is revered as a “sacred site of life's inception,” embodying fertility and the sacredness of nature. It serves as a harbinger of good news for women who were once barren, deeply intertwined with the locals' ecological beliefs and cultural identity. Simultaneously, ecologically speaking, the uterus represents nature's regenerative capacity, while human desecration embodies humanity's destruction of this natural renewal. Examples include land degradation and species extinction caused by excessive exploitation.

4. Ecological Reflections on the Relationship Between Humans and Nature

4.1. Ecological Arrogance and Cultural Misinterpretation Among Western Tourists

Saving Fish from Drowning not only presents rich natural imagery and landscapes but also, through the interactions of tour group members with these natural elements, profoundly analyzes the distorted relationship between humans and nature in modern society while exploring sustainable ecological wisdom.

In Yunnan, China, many ethnic minorities widely practice the custom of “cave worship”[4]. The tourists knew of a cave associated with women and expressed great anticipation to see it. Yet when the cave finally appeared before them, they mistakenly assumed it was a toilet. While this situation appears to stem from the tour group's ignorance of local culture, the guidebook provided by the former tour leader explicitly introduced the “Womb Cave,” and they were accompanied by a local guide throughout their visit. Thus, the true reason for their unwelcome reception was the tour group's cultural superiority complex. They condescendingly viewed Western civilization as the only true civilization, dismissing the indigenous cultures of remote ethnic minorities as backward and uncivilized. They even treated the late tour leader's prepared materials as a sexual joke, failing to read them carefully or deeply understand the local culture.

Here, Amy Tan critiques modern society's disrespect for indigenous cultures and satirizes humanity's alienation from nature.

4.2. The Ecological Hegemony Logic Behind “Rescue” Actions

The novel's central metaphorical event- “*saving fish from drowning*”—exposes the inherent contradiction between anthropocentrism and ecological hegemony through an absurd ritual. The locals of the Lanna Kingdom refer to fish retrieved from water as “drowning victims,” claiming to ‘save’ them by transferring them into baskets. Fishermen impose human fears of “drowning” onto fish that depend entirely on water for survival, completely disregarding the biological nature and survival needs of fish. Once removed from the water, this purported “rescue” instantly becomes a tangible existential threat. This paradox mirrors real-world instances where actions taken in the name of ‘conservation’ actually destroy ecosystems—such as evicting indigenous peoples to establish nature reserves, or eliminating a species' natural predators to “protect” it, thereby causing ecological imbalance.

The criticism of this ritual by Western tourists reveals a deeper logic of ecological colonialism. When American tour groups accuse locals of “ignorance” in the name of “scientific rationality” and attempt to intervene in the ritual, their posture replicates the colonial-era narrative of a “civilizing mission”: they arrogate to themselves the privilege of defining crises and solutions, imposing Western standards upon the natural world of heterogeneous cultures. Beneath this mask of “Ecological Salvationism” lies the consumerist destruction of the Womb Cave—tourists rage over the “suffering” of a few fish while simultaneously treating the sacred cave, symbolizing the source of life, as a toilet, causing its ecological and cultural integrity to collapse simultaneously.

4.3. Indigenous Ecological Wisdom and Sustainable Survival Practices

The Nan Yi tribe practices polytheism, viewing natural elements as divine incarnations. They believe “guardian spirits, witches, and green elves” govern ecological balance, and harming nature constitutes blasphemy against the gods. This faith establishes an ethical baseline of “nature's sacred inviolability,” as depicted in the novel where they “revere the gods of land and water,” maintaining a covenant with nature through ritual sacrifices. Tribal cultural taboos restrict human actions, such as designating sacred sites like the “Womb Cave,” prohibiting logging in specific forests, or overfishing. These prohibitions function as localized sustainable development rules, using religious authority to curb resource extraction and ensure ecosystems can recover and thrive.

5. Conclusion

Through an ecocritical analysis of the natural imagery, ecological landscapes, and human behaviors in *Saving Fish from Drowning*, this paper reveals the profound and rich ecological thought embedded in Amy Tan's novel. The novel skillfully employs a series of powerful ecological metaphors to express Tan's profound literary critique of the anthropocentric values, capitalist expansionist logic, cultural hegemony, and modern lifestyles that have precipitated the contemporary ecological crisis. Simultaneously, through the portrayal of primal nature's vitality and the subtle evocation

of indigenous ecological wisdom, Amy Tan expresses reverence for the natural world and issues a call to contemporary humanity, offering significant practical insights.

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